

SAN FRANCISCO GIRLS CHORUS: DREAMS, VISIONS AND A CHORUS OF OUR OWN

BY MARISA BINDER AND SCOTT HORTON

A CHERISHED DREAM

The dream had been cherished in the minds of parents, young musicians and Bay Area music professionals for some time when, in 1975, a performance opportunity and an invitation set into motion the events that would lead to the founding of San Francisco Girls Chorus.

The San Francisco Boys Chorus had served for many years as children's chorus for San Francisco Opera productions, singing parts intended for both boys' and girls' voices interchangeably. All that changed when Opera General Director Kurt Herbert Adler and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich insisted that enough talented young women could be found and trained to sing the female parts in Tchaikovsky's *Pikovaya Dama* (The Queen of Spades) starring Regina Resnik. Mr. Adler turned to choral conductor and new San Francisco Conservatory of Music faculty member Elizabeth Appling. Appling had also been a teacher and conductor of the San Francisco Boys Chorus, and her credentials and vision were perfect for the task.

"When Mr. Adler asked me, I had only been working at the Conservatory for a few days, and the invitation was both daunting and impossible to resist," says Appling. "I was still teaching a few



wondered when it would be their turn to participate in something so extraordinary. Now we had our chance."

groups at the Boys Chorus and knew that some of the boys' sisters and parents had long

THREE YEARS LATER

Although it would be three more years until San Francisco Girls Chorus was formally established in 1978, after the success of *Pikovaya Dama*, Appling and the nascent girls' chorus continued rehearsing and did several more productions with the Opera.

1978 was a watershed

year; Appling and the girls were asked to do



an unprecedented three productions with the Opera: *Otello* with Plácido Domingo, *Werther* with José Carreras and Kathleen Battle, and *La Bohème* with Ileana Contreras and Samuel Ramey. In addition, the San Francisco Girls Chorus was formally established as a non-profit organization with a ready-made pedigree of illustrious performances and productions and a fan base including some of the musical world's top names. Opera stars, conductors and directors from around the world were astonished and impressed with the high level of professionalism and vocal quality Appling and the girls achieved, equaling European children's choruses decades and centuries their seniors. San Francisco Girls Chorus was off and running as the first ensemble for young women in the United States.

TRAINING AND CONSISTENCY: THE CHORUS SCHOOL

Training and consistency were key, and Appling, a natural with her background as an educator and musician, envisioned a Chorus School from the start. "We had 79 girls from the start with 35 in the concert level and a growing enrollment," remembers Appling. "It was a hungry time for women and girls in the late 1970s. We were ready for things made

especially for us, and the world had changed enough to be ready to open some opportunities." The school grew so well and so rapidly that in 1983, Appling hired instructor Elizabeth Avakian, who soon became the first Chorus School Director, a position she still holds, having trained hundreds of young women.

CHRISTMAS CONCERTS

Aside from the Opera engagements, in the early years the San Francisco Girls Chorus buttered its bread with Christmas concerts. "Like the Ballet and *Nutcracker*, we made money doing holiday performances," says Appling. "I remember one year being exhausted after 39 shows, including weekly performances at bustling Ghirardelli Square. We got a lot of exposure—to people and the weather—and became better known in the Bay Area."

The holiday successes led to a continuing tradition and catapulted the Girls Chorus into a full season. By 1982, Appling noticed that nobody in the Bay Area was doing holiday sing-alongs on a large scale. "I had picked up a recording of a sing-along that had been done annually in London at Royal Albert Hall," she recalls. "Several generations of families made it a holiday tradition, with grandparents bringing grandchildren for the first time to an event they had been brought to as children by their elders. What a wonderful idea, I thought. I floated the idea, and our ambitious Executive Director, Carol Zimmerman, said, 'let's call Davies Hall!', which had just recently opened. We were amazed to get a concert date. Within two weeks of the performance we were sold out, and the Girls Chorus has performed there every year since." Emboldened by success and support, the next year saw the Girls Chorus launching a multiple-concert San Francisco season, a milestone in the organization's growth.

BECOMING A NATIONAL TREASURE

Never resting on laurels, San Francisco Girls Chorus prepared for its first tour and made as big a splash as its launch with San Francisco Opera by traveling to Washington D.C. at the invitation of President Reagan to perform at the White House. "The City of San Francisco so believed in the Girls Chorus that Mayor Dianne Feinstein herself went public to raise

funds for the Washington tour," recalls Appling. "To her and many others, the Girls Chorus represented the face and the future of San Francisco." In a fitting tribute to all that it has accomplished in its 30 seasons, San Francisco Girls Chorus returned to Washington D.C. in January 2009 to sing at the inaugural ceremony of President Barack Obama. No longer just an offshoot from the San Francisco Opera, San Francisco Girls Chorus is a national treasure in its own right.

The San Francisco Girls Chorus continues to represent the face and the future of San Francisco in performances, tours and recordings in both the US and abroad. In addition to four self-produced concerts in its 30th season and



its performance at the presidential inauguration, the Girls Chorus made its debut at the renovated Alice Tully Hall at New York's Lincoln Center in April 2009. Internationally, San Francisco Girls Chorus has been honored to sing at many important venues, including the World Choral Symposium in Kyoto, Japan, in 2005; as the delegate for North America in the prestigious World Vision Children's Choir Festival in Seoul, Korea; and in the Gateway to Music Festival at the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing.

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

In recognition of its excellence, the Girls Chorus has won many accolades such as three Grammy® awards for its performances on several San Francisco Symphony recordings. Additional awards have included Chorus America's "Margaret Hillis Award" and two ASCAP awards for Adventurous Programming in 1999 and 2004. San Francisco Girls Chorus' discography includes *Voices of Hope and Peace*, *Crossroads*, and *Music from the Venetian Ospedali*, a disc of Italian Baroque music which inspired *The New Yorker* to proclaim the Girls Chorus "tremendously accomplished." A new release is scheduled for Fall 2009.



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SCHOOL EXPANSION

With such a stellar reputation, the Girls Chorus School has expanded to offer training to choristers ranging from ages 5-18 in both San Francisco and the East Bay. Today, more than 300 singers from 160 schools in 44 Bay Area cities participate in this internationally recognized program, deemed “**a model in the country for training girls’ voices**” by the California Arts Council.

The San Francisco Girls Chorus is a former grantee of the California Arts Council. To learn more about this dynamic group of artists and the training behind its success, please visit the Girls Chorus’ website at www.sfgirlschorus.org.

